The Rev.

James Foster

of

Newmills,

1850-90



and the Bush that burned in Tyrone.



by John T. Carson

Lydia Mary Foster

Presbyterian Historical Society

# THE REV. JAMES FOSTER of Newmills, Co. Tyrone 1850–1890

and "the Bush that Burned" in Tyrone.

by JOHN T. CARSON

Line drawings by Elizabeth Beresford.

THE PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IRELAND Room 218, Church House, Fisherwick Place, Belfast, BT1 6DW.



TOWN MISSIONARY — FRIEND OF DR. HENRY COOKE — FATHER OF THE DISTINGUISHED AUTHORESS OF THE BUSH THAT BURNED — "THE VERY MODEL OF A COUNTRY PARSON".

### FOREWORD

"In this place (the land of Beulah), says the wise Bunyan, "there was a record of the names of them that had been pilgrims of old, and a history of all the famous acts that they had done", and I, who have not reached that land, but only caught glimpses of it in dreams and visions, and sometimes felt a waft of breath from its hills of peace, would seek to imitate its heavenly wisdom and would record here the name of one who was noble among his brethren, and tell of some of his famous acts. For the noblest ministers of the Church have not occupied her highest pulpits, nor stood in the public eye. They loved the shade as their Master did, and when He comes in His glory, He will set many of these last first of all.

- from a tribute paid by the Rev. Dr. J.C. Johnston of Dublin to yet another great servant of the Master who laboured all his life in a modest country congregation.

# Newmills Newmills

Come ye apart it seems to say unto the passer-hv.

Leave this vain world, for God I stand These walls have watched a hundred under the open sky

years glide like our nver past, And seen the strong brought low, and laid my shadow neath at last.

With loving hearts and toil-worn hands All honour to the noble few in faith who turned the sod,

they raised this House of God.

When wondrous Pentecostal acts were And God upon their labours smiled, soon came the "Year of Grace" witnessed in this place. A wind that blow from heavenly lands new strength our borders gained. showers of blessing rained, Into the Kingdom souls were swept

Here childhood year by year was taught With what momentous issues fraught, Known only to His eyes. God's precious truths to prize,

At Christ's command His Supper off to mem'ry stirred the call. "Our vows to pay now to the Lord before His people all".

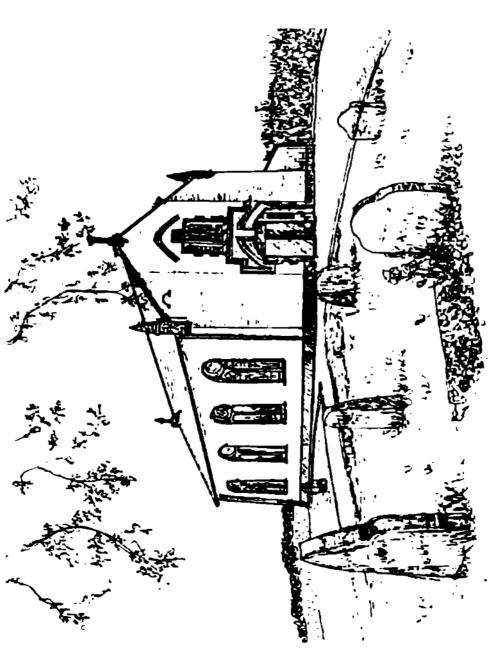
The beeches putting forth fresh leaves. our precincts to adorn,

Are emblems of that fadeless spring-the Resurrection morn.

When God's redeemed who rest around In blood-washed robes enrapt to meet their Saviour in the skies shall blissfully arise.

Newmills! what memones enshrined cling round that name so dear,

O House of God, our fathers' God, we greet your hundredth year.



The poem was written by Lydia Mary Foster in 1937. The line drawing is by Elizabeth Beresford. the centenary year of the congregation.

# THE REV. JAMES FOSTER OF NEWMILLS

Motorways, I think, are impersonal things. It is not that there are not a lot of people on them but everybody is driving on relentlessly and missing much as they go. For example, when we used to go to Dungannon there were Charlemont and Moy, Newmills and Carland, Castlecaulfield and Donaghmore to be seen on the way, depending of course on where you came from. Nowadays there are double carriageways everywhere and seldom a village to stop at if we can avoid doing so.

I have seen Newmills described as "the lovliest village in Ireland" but when I once mentioned this to someone I was left in do doubt about my naivete by the retort, "Nonsense, have you never seen Glasslough?" Being a greenhorn also about Glasslough I did not reply. Since then about Newmills as a beauty spot I remain neutral but of one illustrious Presbyterian family in it I am unreservedly proud — the Fosters of Newmills Manse.

The Presbyterian congregation of Newmills began as a mission station before it became a congregation some time after 1835. It was the Earl of Castlestuart who really got it off the ground for in 1835 he not only supported the appeal of the Seceders there to their Synod but he also gave £50 to the building of their meeting house which cost £180 and he promised an annual sum of the same nature if the minister would reside at Stuart Hall and act as chaplain to his family there.

The congregation had early difficulties and problems before the Rev. James Foster came as its third minister. He was the son of Mr. Anthony Foster of

Enoch, near Dromara and he was born in 1822. He was brought up in First Dromara Presbyterian Church which was one of the largest country congregations in the Synod of Ulster at that time. He was educated at the old Belfast College, now the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, and from the very start of his college life he had a certain stamp of grace and ability which marked him out from others and promised well for the future. He was one of eleven students who were in the habit of meeting together regularly for prayer. Before and after their ordinations they held themselves bound by a covenant to pray for each other especially on Saturday evenings. They were described as "a band of disciples without a Judas among them". When it is added that among them were John Hall (First Armagh and Fifth Avenue, New York), T.Y. Killen (Ballykelly and Duncairn) and Hamilton Magee of the Irish Mission it can be seen that he belonged to a select company.

After he was licensed by the Dromore Presbytery in 1849 James Foster found a field of service in the Belfast Town Mission. This was not unusual for men who had not yet received a call to a congregation. They wanted to be doing something for the kingdom of God while waiting. With James Foster, however, it was far from being just a way of filling in otherwise idle time. He was in earnest about the salvation of men and women who were lost to God and to the Church, and he enjoyed the simplicity and directness of this work. Ever after he spoke with gratitude and enthusiasm as to what this kind of work did for him. He considered it an indispensable aspect of training for the ministry.

He was thus engaged in 1848, the year of the dreadful cholera epidemic which followed the year of the Great Famine and which carried off so many Ulster people, both old and young. We are told that James Foster "ministered fearlessly to the sick and dying, miraculously escaping contagion". He was still at this work when he received a call to Newmills in Co. Tyrone as the third minister of the congregation. The call offered him "an annual stipend of nineteen pounds for his support and encouragement". Because the future of the congregation was so precarious and uncertain he was uncertain as to whether he should go or not and he consulted his friend, the great Dr. Henry Cooke. Without a moment's hesitation, Dr. Cooke said to him, "Take it and work the harder". Although there was no manse offered he accepted the call and was ordained on 12 March 1850.

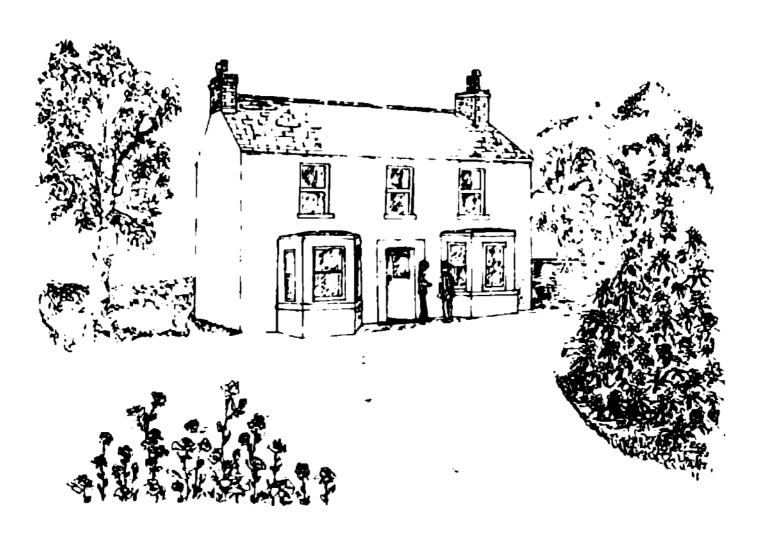
The new minister began well. He gave priority to the formation of a network of prayer meetings encircling the whole congregational area, and on a more personal note he found himself a wife in Lydia Harkness, the sister of his ministerial neighbour in First Stewartstown, the Rev. I.N. Harkness. She was to prove herself to be a wonderful helpmeet to her husband and a lady of culture and charm to everyone in the congregation and district. A manse was obtained and two differing accounts of this exist. The one describes it as little more than a cottage with the twinkle of the stars visible through the roof. The other

We he munters of the Vierlightinan Church of Newmille having hears a good report of you farmes Laster, and having through the Care of the Priobyling of Lynne had an opportunity of Mouring you gift as a meacher, and being july talisted of your capacity to be One teaches in the Low to hearly call and entirelyon & take whom your the wents of the munty among us, and we promise attention to gover instructions as the Gasfeel respect to your person for your works date, & dabairs to the Discipline of the Prestyterian Church recording to the law of the Lord fears Christ And we further promise the annual been of £26.3.0 - for your suffers course encouragement. Onto and disput in our church this 5th day of November 1849 James & Delo 20 m. fames Loster We Pa Certafy that les presided by Milliam Beggs Viporuland of Gulglay in miderally a Call in the Confugation of New mills in M. Janu Sisoler and shot un more. John Suderon west at the digning of the Call gant Irebury Timos folim keepmille ish of souls buil marky

describes it as "a two-storied house built with stone and lime, surrounded by a wall running for fifty yards and well worthy of the name... The whole was a picture of peace and happiness and passers-by were always arrested by it. "This manse was sited much nearer Coalisland than is the present one and it had a fine view of the countryside.

We will not stop to solve the apparent discrepancy here except to remark that there would appear to be two houses in question. There certainly was no manse when Mr. Foster went first to Newmills and one must have been occupied by him even if only temporarily. After a number of years "with much difficulty and aided by a grant from the General Assembly's Fund" (i.e. the Church and Manse Fund), a suitable house was bought in Bracaville, near Coalisland. There Mr. Foster lived in a predominantly Roman Catholic community in which he was regarded with esteem and affection. It was said of him that, "ardent Protestant though he was, any air of arrogance, or assumption of superiority towards those professing a different form of religion, was at all times repulsive to him".

This manse suffered in the same way as some other houses in the district because of the coal-mining activities nearby. The walls cracked. The floors dropped and the rear wall of the house had to be shored up with buttresses.



The old Newmills Manse at Bracaville, near Coalisland.

However, in spite of the supposed faults of a hundred years ago the house still stands to this day. After Mr. Foster's time a new manse had to be built, this time much nearer to Newmills itself and more convenient for the work of the congregation. Be all this as it may, it can be said without fear of contradiction that the Bracaville Manse was the scene of a very happy family life and of a ministry of power and grace.

# The Newmills Ministry 1850 - 90

Mention has already been made of Mr. Foster's first step in organising prayer meetings all around the parish for the ongoing work of the Church. It should be remembered that in doing this he was doing no more than the General Assembly had, each year after 1840, been counselling all its ministers to do, namely, to pray for a revival of true religion. The Church realised that such an awakening, if it were to be true and lasting, must come from God but they also believed that when it comes, it does so in answer to the prayers of His people. "If My people which are called by My name shall humble themselves and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land". (2 Chron. 7: 14) Believing this promise the Presbyterian Church in Ireland took prayer meetings seriously, and discovered that revival does not come easily or automatically. For twenty years almost the Assembly passed that resolution about prayer for revival before the answer came.

Mr. Foster found the work of Newmills congregation up-hill work but he proved that patient continuance in well doing always gets heaven's reward and under his earnest and prayerful endeavours the congregation grew year by year. There seems to have been a strange reluctance on the part of his leaders to accept the responsibility of office in the congregation and consequently there was always a shortage of elders. The finding of a Presbytery visitation in 1861 "regretted that the minister is still left to labour alone and that he is without the counsel and support of a judicious session". In 1864 five elders were elected but only two were ordained, and four more years passed before two more were added; and it would seem that those were the only elders ordained in Mr. Foster's ministry.

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For years also Mr. Foster wrestled with the problem of alcohol and with his own conscience as to the proper Christian attitude to alcoholic beverages. At this period in time it was considered to be right and proper, and the height of hospitality, to offer the minister such drinks when he came visiting in the homes of his people. But James Foster soon saw that it was the main source of social misery

and poverty. He therefore did some hard thinking and not long after his ordination he made this entry in his diary,

"Yesterday evening proclaimed myself a total abstainer. Hesitated a long time between total abstinence and temperance, but when I came to speak to those over whose souls I have been appointed I could not do otherwise."

In taking this stand, of course, a man had to be prepared for ridicule and even suffering, for total abstainers were very much in the minority. Nevertheless as his daughter, Lydia was to write later, "He lived to see the cause he had so courageously espoused in the day of small things become one of the mightiest forces for the regeneration of the land and the hastening of the kingdom of God". Christ's kingdom! yes, that to him was more important even than enrolling abstainers and when the memorable year of 1859 came, bringing with it God's reviving of His Church, James Foster saw it as the remedy of many social evils and as the answer to so many of his own prayers.

### THE REVIVAL OF 1859

The minister of Newmills welcomed this movement with open arms and entered into it with joyous enthusiasm. At the same time he watched over it with sober care and judgment. "The simple fact is", to quote his daughter again, "that so far as the congregation was concerned, it was born anew in the great revival".

Lying before me as I write is an interesting and indeed a valuable document written in Mr. Foster's own handwriting. It is headed, "Notes on the religious awakening in the congregation of Newmills and the surrounding neighbourhood", and in it with almost clinical precision he records the cases of individuals who came under conviction of sin and to whom he was called to give help and for whom he felt responsible.

Meetings were held in the Presbyterian church every Tuesday evening and open air gatherings were held all over the district throughout the week. Men and women of all classes seized every opportunity of hearing the message of salvation over and over again. Many were 'stricken', some with bodily pain while some even declared they saw visions. Mr. Foster strongly discouraged such eccentricities and repeatedly warned his people that "we must not trust in mere imagination for that occurs in bodily diseases; we must trust only in the atonement of Christ, laying hold on the promises of God in the Bible".

These "NOTES" which Mr. Foster kept so carefully are about the people he visited. As soon as he knew that they had come under the power of God's

Spirit, he was with them. Sometimes it happened in his own meeting house and sometimes in neighbouring ones, like Sandholes or Newlands Established Church. Others were stricken down at services in the open air and some at no service at all. For example,

"--- had been at no meeting, a careless, cursing, reckless girl. Was stricken down in her own home. Says she was not thinking about the matter at all. Had been for some hours violently and convulsively affected. Now calm and feels ease in mind; and purposes to live better."

From these records it is evident that the Revival was marked by a general feeling of intense sinfulness. Some of the people kept saying "My heart is hard to break. My heart is hard to break". They often suffered real agony before they found peace and Mr. Foster was too wise a physician of sinful hearts to encourage "cheap grace" or "easy believism". Accordingly when men and women cried out he wisely steered the seeking soul away from the psychological snares and the spiritual bypaths to find salvation in Christ alone.

The first entry in the "NOTES" is dated 'Tuesday June 16, 1859' and the last one, 'Sabbath, June 3, 1860', and this last one is about two people who came to feel their need of Christ in his own church service that morning. The book reveals Mr. Foster as a faithful shepherd of his flock. He rejoiced as a farmer in his harvest. He is always counselling, always concerned to see the converts growing in grace and always organising groups for fellowship in the homes of the converts themselves. "May the Lord smile on it for His glory's sake" in his modest comment as he brings the record to a conclusion.

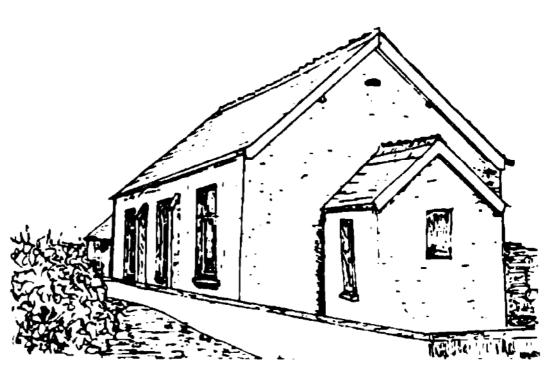
We have given this extended coverage of Mr. Foster's "NOTES" for two reasons; first because it is an unusually careful description of special cases, indeed a unique record. And secondly, because it shows a minister at his best in the Revival, rejoicing at the salvation of his people and redirecting the weaknesses of human nature into useful channels in the work of the Church.

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For another thirty years Mr. Foster was to remain in Newmills, the faithful pastor and the beloved friend of an entire community. When in the will of God a minister is called to spend all his ministry in one single congregation, and a small one at that, he may be tempted to think of himself as filling a small and unimportant place in the Church. The temptation should be resisted strenuously for many examples could be given where congregations only got really established in such a ministry as this . . . Moreover, it is the Lord of the harvest Who alone knows the value of any man's service. We have the best of good reasons for believing that

one of the surprises of the Great Day will be the discovery that in the judgement of God "the last shall be first and the first last". James Foster's ministry was one such and when it came to an end one Ulster weekly newspaper said he was "the very model of a country parson". No man who succeeds in being that need envy his better known brethren or ask for a bigger and wider sphere.

Mr. Foster was as much concerned for the well-being of his people in this world as he was for their happiness in the next. He started a school for Presbyterian children in the Coalisland area and when the building which he used changed hands and the room was denied him for school



The Foster Memorial Hall, Coalisland.

purposes and for occasional services, he inspired the collection of funds to build another. Throughout the years since then, it has been used by all sorts of good causes in the town. Long after his death it was given the name, "The Foster Memorial Hall', because it was the symbol of a good man's interest in the mental and physical welfare of his people as well as in their spiritual good.

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James Foster's preaching was much like himself, quiet and earnest. It aimed at being clear rather than exciting. It sounded oftener the offered mercy of God than His stern judgements. It was, perhaps, nearer to Calvary than to Sinai. We have an example of this in a sermon of his on "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no Physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" (Jer. 8. 22).

"The Gospel is designed, prepared and offered to heal men's souls of sin. This it effectually does when it is allowed to operate. It is an absolute antidote and corrective of sin. It is a radical and thorough cure. It strikes at sin where sin's power is greatest and its hold

strongest. The two most serious elements in the soul, of sin as it affects us, are its guilt in the sight of a just God and its degrading influence on human nature. The Lord Jesus Christ has removed both of these for all who accept Him as their Saviour. His great work answers these ends. It takes away sin's guilt and power. It fully satisfies the justice of God and it liberates and purifies the sinner's heart and life. It sets right the disordered affections. It regulates and invigorates the moral principles. It makes the inner nature sound and strong. What wondrous healing power!"

Perhaps that sounds trite and ordinary now but it fell like dew on thirsty ground when it was heard in Newmills church then. There were no stained glass windows to add colour or elegance to that sanctuary but the glory of God was there and it gilded the plain walls with a beauty all their own. The good folk there, scions of old Plantation families, were proud of the fact that for neither fear or favour, had they disavowed the Covenanting blood that ran in their veins, but even more than that, they also loved their minister's earnestness in the Gospel and his directness in preaching it. One can well believe that many were moved to love the Saviour as well as to love His servant who pleaded with them so tenderly. The sermon already quoted ended with an earnest appeal:

"Perhaps some do not feel their need of any remedy though it is hard to think they be satisfied with their present condition. But whatever be your opinion of yourself, give Christ a trial. Even though you have little desire for Him, or expectation from Him, ask Him to undertake your case. Place yourself in His hands. Do as He directs you. Submit to His treatment and before long you will find the blessed effect of His ministration, and know by your renewed health that there is balm in Gilead and that there is a Divine physician there."

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In Mr. Foster's case the best remembered things about him were his godliness of life, his integrity of character and spirit, so like his Master. These certainly were the things that lived on in the minds of his people and it will ever be so. As his daughter Lydia so aptly put it,

"The tie that bound Mr. Foster to his people was that of love. He was their friend and confidant and in their homes where he was ever welcomed, his gentle presence will be remembered. Quiet and unassuming in manner, charitable in his judgement of others, he went about in the spirit of his Master, and surely the meek and lowly Nazarene never had humbler follower than He."

One of his fellow Presbyters, the Rev. Dr. H.B. Wilson of Cookstown said that he was a supreme example of one who followed the apostolic pattern "The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle." "He was a man of true piety, gentle, conciliatory, considerate for others, and incapable of wilfully wounding their feelings or doing them an injustice. . . . . living a quiet and unostentatious life, a man of prayer, of consistent conduct who sought to bring all within the sphere of his influence under the saving power of Divine truth".

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For all his gentleness of word and manners there was an undeniable loyalty and adherence to Christ and the terms of the Gospel. He never sold the truth to serve the hour. When Dr. H.B. Wilson preached at his memorial service on the Sunday afternoon following the funeral, he reminded the congregation that he had watched for their souls as one who must give account that he might do it with joy and not with grief. "Ministers, it is obvious", he went on, "must give account to God. There is no class of men who have more cause to tremble in prospect of judgment than unfaithful ministers". James Foster was not one of these and Dr. Wilson went on to say,

"Let the Gospel he preached, the counsels he gave, the prayers he offered in your hearing and the warnings he uttered, all remain in your memories, and derive force and solemnity from the fact that you will see and hear his voice no more. And yet one thought remains to be expressed that should stir all our hearts. You and Mr. Foster will meet again not only in heaven in the exhuberant joy of the saved but meet before the great Judgment Throne."

There is a vast difference between a preacher who is for ever falling into a scolding condemnatory tone and one who, under a great compulsion preaches the whole counsel of God. The important thing is that there must be love in the heart as well as conviction in the mind, a burden on the spirit as well as mere lips however eloquent. When the Rev. Dr. John Watson, better known as Ian Maclaren, went to Sefton Park Presbyterian Church in Liverpool he said in his first sermon, "I shall not try to admonish you with any display of learning, nor attract you by the mere eloquence of words, but I promise by the grace of God and according to my ability to preach the cross of Christ". That was what Mr. Foster's ministry was for all but forty years and it forged an indissoluable affection between him and his people.

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The pilgrim's journey ended on 4 March 1890 and we may well adapt Bunyan's words about Christian when he arrived at the Gate Beautiful:

"The Pilgrim they laid in a large upper room whose windows stood open to the sun's rising; and the name of that chamber was Peace, where he slept till the break of day, and awoke, and sang."

It is scarcely possible adequately to portray the grief and sorrow felt by a congregation and a countryside when a ministry like this ends. Country folk have often a sense of the fitness of things that seems denied to others and Mr. Foster's funeral was a fine example of this. When the hearse left the house it was preceeded by the children of the Sunday School and then it was followed in turn by the family friends, the Kirk Session, the Newmills congregation and then by the general public. The long procession of people stretched half a mile into the distance. Then as it approached the meeting house the church choir went out to meet it and as they went, they led the vast concourse in singing "The Lord's my Shepherd", the psalm that had been their minister's favourite item of praise. It was his rod and staff through life and the One of whom it speaks was his hope beyond the grave. Nothing was here for bitter regrets but loving tears there were in plenty as they buried him close by the walls that for so long echoed with his gentle voice.

Someone — now unknown — who was present on that occasion well expressed the feelings of a wide countryside with a long poem of twelve verses which began, "Is it true? Is it true that our friend is dead?" The ode has not the grace and elegance of our modern John Betjeman's Christmas poem which commences with much the same line but it expressed the sorrow and affection of a congregation of simple, country people, grateful for a beloved minister. Five verses of the poem will suffice here:

"Is it true? Is it true that our good friend is dead?"
Came from the lips of rich and poor;
As they stood at the door of Bracaville Manse
Shedding many a bitter tear.
Had an earthquake shaken the hills,
Or a thunderbolt been heard,
A greater shock could not have been felt
Than to know that our friend was dead.
For forty years he preached in truth
The Gospel of Jesus Christ;
And all that time he was seldom found
Taking e'en a Sabbath's rest.

Now rich and poor, and old and young,
Have joined with us to weep
O'er the grave of the good James Foster
Whose memory we'll ever keep.
Still, why should we weep as those do weep
Who have no hope beyond,
For we know that in heaven we shall meet again
If we to Christ belong.

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### THE LEGACY OF THE REV. JAMES FOSTER

James Foster was not the first minister whose best legacy had little to do with earthly wealth and property but it had a great deal to do with a steadfast walk with God within his own family and home. It was said of him by one of his neighbouring ministers that "he bequeathed to his children an unsullied name and the blessing that belongs to the children of the godly". Many another had done that, of course, but in his case it could be said that had it not been for the effect of his life on his family he might never have been remembered, for it was largely its impression on them that gave the Foster family an indisputable place in the Presbyterian Church's story.

There were six children in all, three boys and three girls. The eldest in the family, Nevin Harkness, became manager of the Hillsborough Weaving Co. and even better known as a foremost ornithological expert in Ireland. He had not spent his early years in the county of Tyrone without acquiring a knowledge of things botanical and ornithological which made him unrivalled in Ireland in this field of knowledge. For many years he was the writer of the Nature Notes in the Belfast morning newspaper, The Northern Whig and Belfast Post.

James Thomas, the youngest of them all, was only seventeen years old when his father died in 1890 and he emigrated to Canada soon afterwards. William Anthony went to live with his three sisters when they all moved to Belfast in the same year. William was associated with the hardware firm of Patterson's, then situated in Bridge Street.

Of the three girls Jane Wallace, came second in the family, Lydia Mary was the fourth and Susan Margaret Elizabeth (Bessie) the fifth. They were described as "as fine girls as you would find in all county Tyrone, and it is not too much to say that they contributed much to the fame and renown of the family. The two elder girls, there is good reason to believe, were educated at home first of all and

then at Miss Black's school in Holywood where they appear to have boarded during the week. Jane became an accomplished musician and Lydia had genius and a literary flair as yet undiscovered

The third girl, Bessie was educated at a girls' school at Seatown Place, Dundalk, and was only just finishing there when her father died. When the others moved to Belfast, Bessie went for a final year to Victoria College, Belfast, before going to Trinity College, Dublin, where she matriculated in 1892 and from which she graduated in Ancient and Modern Languages in 1896. During her undergraduate days she had earned some money by teaching and it was not surprising



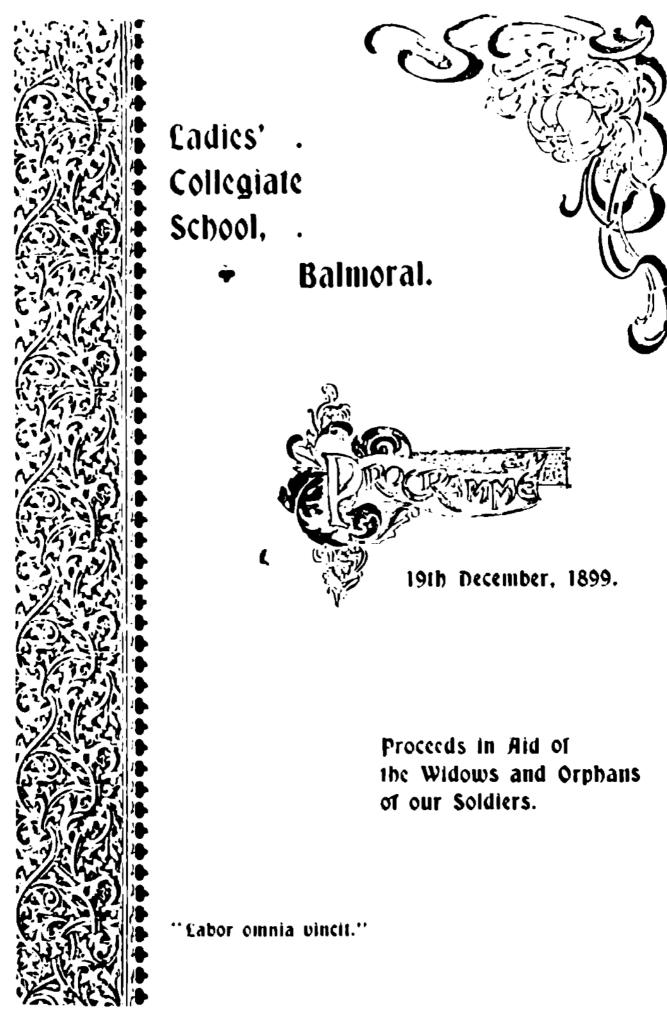
The three sisters, Bessie, Lydia, and Jane.

that the three sisters should combine their gifts and their talents, and start a school together. They therefore opened a Ladies Collegiate School at Balmoral, Belfast. It was held at "Longfield", Myrtlefield Park, their first home in the city. They later moved it to 434 Lisburn Road, and later still to "Eastwood", 14 Maryville Park. This school was mostly attended by local girls but it had also some boarders who, with their teachers, attended Malone Presbyterian Church on Sundays and sat in Pew No. 21 on the gallery. The school afterwards took in a number of boys who showed considerable talent and progress and some of them attained high academic honours in their later careers.

It was a gentle kind of culture and scholarship which emanated from this humble seat of learning. It was said that there were books in the school library that were seldom seen in any library in the city, and students and former pupils came back to it often as if drawn by a magnet. It was also the centre of music and good fun. The three sisters had not been brought up to pay others to entertain them; they did it themselves and they found others to share it with them.

They lived frugally; indeed some people thought they lived too frugally. But they had to and yet they never gave the impression that they were missing much of the fun and gaiety of life. Indeed the very opposite was the case and their sense of humour was a saving grace which they possessed in abundance. Lydia loved to tell a story against herself about a Temperance meeting which she attended about this time. One of the things which they inherited from their father was his strong conviction of the evil effects of drink in the lives of many people and in the community as well. Consequently one of their enthusiasms was the Catch-my-Pal movement which was in its hey-day at this time. The meeting was held in the Assembly Hall, Church House, Belfast, and notwithstanding that fact that her hearing was beginning to be difficult Lydia and Bessie thought it was their duty to give it their support. Seeing many in the audience rise in their places with upraised hands, wanting to contribute something to what was being said Lydia thought, she also stood to her feet only to be quickly pulled back to her seat. She tried it a second time but was no more successful; Bessie would not allow it at all. The opportunity was lost apparently and the matter was dropped until they were going out and Lydia asked why she was not allowed to say what she wanted. Bessie pointed out that the leader of the meeting had not asked for verbal contributions from anyone but rather wanted all "reclaimed drunkards" to stand with upraised hands to show what the movement had accomplished. They often made fun of each other about the "reclaimed drunkard" in their midst.

The school prospered for more than twenty years, and then what looked like tragedy struck. First, Bessie died on Christmas Day 1917 and Jane on 26 October of the following year. William, who had shared the home with his sisters, died on 28 December 1922 to leave Lydia to face the world alone. There were none of the social benefits of to-day for a single woman of nearly sixty



Programme of their school concert during the South African War.

years of age, but there was plenty of what her manse home had put into her, namely, grace, grit and resourcefulness and the grace of God.

After asking herself what she could do at her age Lydia decided to try her hand at writing. She contributed to magazines and periodicals. She wrote short stories and plays. She even dared to write peotry and verse. Whether or not she was surprised by the immediate success which came her way has not been recorded; certain it is that it earned a modest and much needed monetary reward.

Ill health began to hinder her efforts. For years she had become increasingly deaf. The school had, of course, closed by this time but, stone deaf though she was, the old pew in Malone Church was always occupied; yet she never heard a single word spoken by the minister.

Her entry into the literary world in a big way was like the bursting of a new planet into the sky. Lydia had long wanted to write a story of Newmills Church and of Presbyterian life in Co. Tyrone. She realised her ambition in 1931 and to the book she gave the title, The Bush that Burned. It turned out to be a classic of its type and, of course, it became a best seller. As soon as it appeared it was hailed as something quite unique. It explored that rich field of character and activity that is the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and did so with a deep knowledge of human nature and with a fine touch of humour. It blended these elements with such expertise and good taste as led one churchman, the Rev. Dr. J.C. Johnston, who could turn a fine phrase himself, to say, "Not since Ian Maclaren's sketches of rural life in Scotland have I had such real pleasure". Another reviewer was even more generous; "We have been awaiting a novelist who knew Ulster life intimately and who could depict it with understanding and sympathy. The author of this novel is the author we have been eagerly expecting". The Bush that Burned even got favourable mention in London journals, an honour not often accorded to such writing.

The Bush that Burned saw the funny side of things connected with the Presbyterian meeting house, such as the precentor's tuning fork, the long handled collecting ladels, the old smokey coke stoves, the boots that squeaked down the aisles on Sunday mornings and the romances that affected the heads of the daughters of the manse. Nevertheless this "brilliant portrayal of Presbyterian life", as the Irish Independent described it, had no barbs or cynicism about it. Lydia Foster loved her Church too much for that. It was a noteworthy achievement for a woman of sixty-six years of age.

Miss Foster's next book was "Tyrone Among the Bushes", a collection of smaller pieces of both prose and poetry. This had on it the stamp of a poet who never lost her sincere love for her native county. In similar vein she shared a place with others like Sam Henry, Matt Mulcaghey and "Tullyneil", in at least three volumes of Ulster Parade, a light-hearted publication which appeared during the early years of World War II.

Manse Larks had appeared a little earlier in 1936 and in it she told the story of the family life of Newmills manse. This book was really written for her grand-neice, Mary Gibson of "Hollowbridge", Hillsborough, who now as Mrs. Trimble and living in the Clogher Valley, still has the original manuscript. It hears the hawlmark of something which gave its author a great deal of pleasure. In it she tries to conceal the names of the children but she makes a very poor job of it. She succeeds in painting a notable, if a romantic picture of what her home did for her. Her other larger books may appeal more to the reviewers of sophisticated magazines and journals, but for many others, and I count myself among them, Manse Larks will always have a special place. It has delicacy and charm. It is not afraid to be childish and yet it succeeds in being astonishingly adult. Its feet are among the bushes in Tyrone but its heart is in heaven, and if this brief survey of this nineteenth century family and home would only create a desire for similar homes and families in this century it were well worth telling you about it here. Let me illustrate what I mean:

First of all there was Lydia's love for her home and her loyalty to it at all costs. This was seen in innumerable ways but one curious little incident is memorable. On one occasion when scarlet fever came to the manse the other children had to be sent to Belfast for six weeks until what was then a dreaded disease had subsided and gone. The excitement of city life, the noise, and the trams and the big shops soon lost their glamour and the children longed for Newmills again. "I would have given all Belfast had I owned it for that old-fashioned white washed home with its low roof and windows holding many little panes . . . . . When I got home again I remember putting my arms round the trees and telling them that I loved them." That's what Lydia thought of it.

Another thing that to Lydia was unforgettable was her father's family worship. True it often seemed long to the small ones and their patience was sometimes strained as when they were all brought in for it just when their neighbour's pony died, but that was not the enduring memory they had of their father's evening prayers. One occasion always remained in Lydia's mind although there were many more,

"I shall never forget Papa's prayer that night. It was one of thanksgiving to God for all His mercies. It is fifty years since I listened to it but I can re-echo its gratitude to our Heavenly Father and say from my heart, "Surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life."

The story of her own conversion to God is another classic passage and is among the "unforgettable and unforgotten" things about Newmills for her. It too comes from Manse Larks. Her eldest brother and she had gone skating on Droon Lough. Daring as he always was he ventured too near to the thin ice which gave way under him. Lydia described what happened,

"For the first time in my life I prayed earnestly. Never before that I knew, had I prayed like this . . . . . and something seemed to say to me, 'Take off your cloak and throw it to him'.

With considerable courage she went as near to the broken ice as she dared, threw one end of the cloak to him and it held him up until help arrived for them both. Lydia was praised by everybody and at prayers that night her father "thanked God for great mercies bestowed upon them that day". We will let Lydia finish the story in her own way:

"That night on going to my room I sat a long time on my bed thinking over and over again what had happened. I then went down my my knees to say my prayers and realised for the first time what 'Our Father, which art in heaven' really meant. I felt Him at that moment quite near . . . . I just asked Him in simple childish language to forgive my sins and to help me to love and serve Him to my life's end. . . I was only twelve when I gave God my young heart.'

Another thing was true of Lydia and, we may be sure, of all the others was her abiding love of Presbyterian worship in general and of Newmills in particular. Like her father she could never have been a bigot seeing no good in Churches other than her own, but she felt that what meant so much to her was something worth holding on to. She loved Newmills with what amounted to a passion. She contributed to it with a liberality which surprised those who knew her and she often returned to show her interest and to worship there. She also laid the foundation stone of the new manse which was built in 1910. Someone else who saw this congregational loyalty on her part put it well,

"The walls of Newmills church were to her Canterbury and St. Peter's rolled into one . . . . . When the Committee on the Union of congregations first threatened them with extinction (merely uniting them with another congregation! J.T.C.) she fought them tooth and nail, and in the end smote them hip and thigh (that is, they did not succeed in their plans).

Newmills also coloured her whole idea of the Lord's Supper to which she often referred in her writings. It was a means of grace extraordinary as far as she was concerned:

"Compared with the Presbyterian mode of the observance of the sacrament, elaborate ceremony or gorgeous ritual is artificial and out of keeping. The awed mystic silence of a large congregation, come to celebrate the sacred rite, the bowed heads, the searching, solemn admonition of the minister who to the partakers distributes the elements, the rendering of the familiar, appropriate psalms that accompany it to the old majestic tunes, endeared by generations of association, all combine to create a spiritual feeling of beloved

contact with our Saviour and gratitude for His sacrifice for us, and a vivid perception of the Presence of the Holy Spirit can be felt in the midst." (Elders Daughters)

What it meant to be brought up as a Presbyterian in Newmills may be guessed at in another of her poems, which is in fact, thinly disguised autobiography:

### KILDARRAGH MEETING HOUSE

Oh! for Kildarragh Meeting-house, where I sat when a lad, When sight and sound and wind are gone I'll mind the smeel it had, And when I reach the golden gates I think the Heavenly air Will have that sacred fust that laid the backs of Bibles bare.

Its windows were just windows made for letting in the light, And whiles we looked out through them and thanked the Lord for sight, We saw His birds, His clouds, His trees — surely these things surpass The heathen's painted images on variegated glass.

In God's House on Kildarragh Hill I think I see the man Dared stand up in its pulpit sayin' hymn in place of psalm. He'd turn to stone ere our four walls would hear a human lilt; We had our faults but free we were from such presumptuous guilt.

Our minister — I left him last — for I may hold my tongue, A man content that most his pay was hearts that round him clung; His castor hat, his white cravat, his doctrine all were soun' And when he touch'd upon the Pope — he'd tear his pulpit gown!

'Tis a brave step to Kildarragh but it's there I be to rest, For "the sands of time are sinking" and my sun is in the West. And if in God's House forever my dwelling place shall be, 'Twas because in His great mercy Kildarragh nurtured me.

. . . . . . . .

Though bereft of her hearing she lived a comparatively full life, scribbling away and expressing her faith and her philosophy of life in every line she wrote. For example, she shared her family's love of animals of every kind and in her later years had a dog who became ears to her in her deafness and to whom she inscribed a poem which summed up how she felt. It comes from Tyrone among the Bushes and is entitled "To Stewart",

"Nobody knows the friends we were Only he and I, Friend, Companion, Protector, Lover . . . . ."

When Stewart died, rather than leave him in the garden of a Belfast house which she was soon to vacate, she removed him to "Hollowbridge", near Hillsborough, the country home of her niece where she herself spent her last few years. Needless to say, the R.S.P.C.A. was one of her strong interests and favourite charities.

She was always convinced that it was the sin of men and women that led to the defacement of human life but she did not, on that account imagine that there was nothing she could do to remove its worst features and offset its evil effects. She worked for the relief of the oppressed, the weak and the socially deprived and once again gave it practical expression in her ready help for Dr. Barnardo's Homes.

World War II came to Belfast in all its severity in the Blitz of April 1940. Lydia, as much to help another lonely person as to have a little company herself, had another woman come in to spend her nights in 14 Maryville Park. When the bombs began to fall the visitor's calm was shattered and she came near to panic. Lydia's deafness was an advantage and she took command of the situation. They took refuge under the dining-room table and in order to restore the shattered nerves of her companion Lydia read to her from the forty-sixth psalm. "Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea..... The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge". "It did no good", Lydia said afterwards about her friend, "She was as determined to be killed after it as she was before it". She could still see the funny side of things!

. . . . . . . .

When she seventy-four years of age Lydia Foster wrote her second large book, Elders Daughters. As she got near the end of it she could hardly hold the pen herself and she had to dictate the later chapters to her neice at "Hollowbridge". In her earlier book she had portrayed the characters of manse daughters with skill and understanding, and now she sought to do the same for "elders' daughters" whom she understood equally as well. Elders' Daughters was described as "good .... but hardly as fresh as the first" and even that was high praise in itself. As it turned out, it was an immediate success and within four months she saw it sell two editions before she herself died on 13 December 1943.

At the time of her death Mr. John C. Arnold, K.C., wrote a fitting panegyric in which he said,

"Newmills received her back to rest almost within sound of the river that gurgles down under the viaduct to find its home in Lough Neagh, and well within the sound of the psalms when they float out through

the open window. She would rather be there than in the nave of Westminster Abbey."

. . . . . . . .

There must we part company with a remarkable family that was typical of the best in Irish Presbyterianism. It was warm-heartedly evangelical in its love of Christ and the old-new story of His Gospel of grace. It was denominationally loyal without being narrow or bigoted in its attitude to other Christians. It rejoiced to hear of evangelistic blessing and revival. It was healthily busy in working for better conditions in society and for everything that would improve life especially for those that were weak, or deprived, or disadvantaged in any way. Above all, it was a family which had a refreshing assurance that just as Winter gives way to Spring, so the life that now is will be succeeded by one that is far more full of colour, and song, and fulfilment than this one could ever be. In fact, Heaven was more truly their country than the Tyrone that they loved so much, more securely their home than was Newmills, where most of them were laid to rest neath a headstone bearing an inscription so apt — and so true — and so satisfying:

"In Christ - In Peace - In Hope."

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